

CHAPTER XVIII

BIRTH CUSTOMS, CHILDHOOD

BIRTH CUSTOMS

843 Among the Sgaw Karen in the Pegu Hills and on the plains there appear to be but few special customs connected with the births of children. Offspring are desired, and a large family gives joy to the parents. A pregnant woman experiences but little lightening of her usual tasks and works up to the time of her delivery. The prospective mother is expected to omit bitter herbs and fruits from her diet, as these are thought to be harmful to her; while her husband avoids having his hair cut during her pregnancy, lest it should bring ill-luck and shorten the life of the child.

844 Old women usually serve as midwives and are sometimes believed to possess considerable skill in aiding delivery, although they are without special training for the function they perform. Custom is too deeply ingrained for them to profit much from their own experience. They resort to massage to hasten the birth, and in stubborn cases they tread upon the abdomen to expel the foetus. They believe in aiding nature rather than in letting nature take its own course, even in normal cases. For her services the midwife receives a rupee and a bundle of dried bark for the preparation of a head-washing solution ("t' yaw"). She uses the solution to prevent the eruption of some sort of itching skin-disease, after which she anoints herself with sandal wood. In case the delivery should be abnormal, the midwife would receive double wages. If the labors are unduly prolonged and she can not bring things to pass, she sends for a soothsayer or a medicine-man, who usually gives the suffering woman little else than a cup of charmed water ("hti th' mu").

165
845 When a woman dies before the child is delivered, it must be extracted before the funeral ceremonies are performed. In case this can not be conveniently done at the time, the operation is postponed until the body is carried to the place of burning or burial, the foetus being then removed through an incision in the abdomen. This operation is thought necessary, in order to prevent the reincarna-

BIRTH CUSTOMS, CHILDHOOD

169

tion of the spirit of the woman from having a deformity in the abdomen.

If the child survives its birth, the umbilical cord and the placenta are wrapped in a cloth or placed in a bamboo joint, and buried in the ground or hung up in a tree. If the latter disposition is made of them, a large tree of one of the hardiest varieties is selected for the purpose, in order that the babe may gain strength therefrom.

Soon after the child is born offerings are presented to the spirit, and a string is tied around the child's wrist to keep its "k' la" from being enticed away. In some cases the cord is tied around the neck and loins as well as the wrist. These threads may be of scarlet to dazzle the eyes of the demons and prevent their seeing the "k' la" of the infant.¹ In Toungoo it is also customary to provide new cooking pots, water buckets, mats, knives, and a new ladder to the house, to render it more difficult for the spirits to find the child. Among the Brechs the husband goes into seclusion for seven days, during which he must speak to no one. He alone cares for the mother and child. Nobody is permitted to enter the house. Among the Padaungs the period of the husband's retirement is a month, and during a month and a half the whole family must live on rice roasted in bamboo joints, boiled rice being tabu. Although the villagers may not speak to the couple, the women are expected to brew a special liquor for their use during this period.² It is usual in these tribes for father and child to perform in pantomime the work that the child will be expected to do when it grows up. For example, the child's hand is put to a miniature hoe, with which the father strikes the ground. Dr. Mason speaks of this as taking place when the father returns from disposing of the placenta, but Dr. Bunker refers to it as coming later, when the father holds a feast for the child.³ On the third day after the birth the father goes on a hunting expedition, the outcome of which is thought to indicate the relative success of the child's life. On the father's return from the hunt the child is bathed to remove all spiritual defilement from it, whereupon the father waves a splint of bamboo downwards over the infant's arm, as if fanning him, and

¹ Cf. Dr. Almon Bunker, *See Tho*, 21.

² Cf. *Notes on the Bur Expedition*, by Capt. Coynder (Rangoon, 1894); also *Notes on the Bur and Padaung Countries*, by Lieut. E. W. Carrick (Rangoon, 1896). These are Government publications.

³ Mason in *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1868; Bunker, *See Tho*, p. 21.

846 says: "Fan away all illness, failure, stupidity, and wretchedness." Then fanning upwards, he says: "Fan on all prosperity, health, and power." After this he ties a thread on the child's arm and gives it the name that he and the mother have chosen for it.

533 Among the Sgaw Karen I find that no special naming customs exist. However, according to our Western ideas, a curious selection of names prevails. One little girl was called Miss Thunder because, as was explained to me by her father, she was born at the time of a thundred storm. The name of a personal peculiarity, a color, an ancestor (especially of one who was prosperous or powerful), a flower, an animal, or a month may serve as a personal name. I know of men who bear such names as Tiger, Eel, Pole Star, Gladness, Yellow, Teacher-come (the person with this last name was born on the day a missionary first visited his village), besides many others equally odd.

551 Nicknames are in vogue among Karen children, as they are among their fellows in the Western hemisphere. Nicknames of a special class are those given by parents to disguise their love of, and their satisfaction in, their offspring, in order to keep the demons away from the latter. Such names suggest parental contempt and lack of affection in the hope of deceiving the evil spirits into thinking that the parents can not be injured through the injury or loss of their children. This practice is illustrated by names like Stink-pot, Rotten-fish, Lame-dog, etc., which often stick to men through life.*

847 Although boys are much more desired than girls, the latter are not mistreated or abandoned, as they are in China and other Oriental countries. The Karen possess a considerable degree of parental affection. Only in extreme danger, as formerly in the case of raids, would parents desert a female child. My observation is that Karen parents are too indulgent to their children and do not exercise as much control over them as would be good for them. Twins are not uncommon among these people, and triplets are not unknown. Twins are considered as having only one "k'la" between them. If one of the pair dies, the early death of the other is feared. Its wrist is, therefore, carefully tied with a cord, and every precaution is taken to prevent the escape of the "k'la." I presume that

* Parents sometimes express their satisfaction over the male sex of a child by applying to him a nickname indicative of the presence of the male genitalia. Such appellations, as terms of endearment, are regularly recognized names and carry no opprobrium with them.

BIRTH CUSTOMS, CHILDHOOD

171

triplets are also thought to share the "k'la" among them, but I am not sure as I have not made inquiry concerning such cases.

It is common for Karen women in Lower Burma who are recovering from child-birth, to observe the custom that prevails among the Burmese, namely, to have a fire on an improvised hearth or in a brasier set near the mat on which they lie. The fire is kept burning constantly for several days or a week after their confinement, to assist them in regaining their strength. The hotter their rooms are kept, the more quickly they are supposed to recover their strength.

CHILDHOOD

The period of childhood is a short one among the Karen.¹ The baby early accompanies its mother on her journeys from place to place or to work, slung on her back by means of an old blanket or skirt. When she puts the infant down, she improvises a hammock out of this cloth by tying ropes to its corners and swinging it from the rafters of the house or the little hut in the field or from the branches of a tree. When the child grows a little older he plays about, while his mother is at work; and when he goes with her he rides on her hip. (See p. 172.) She does not always give up carrying her first child on the arrival of the second. More than once I have seen a mother struggling along with a smaller child on her back and a larger one astride of her hip.

The play of Karen children, more than that of the little folk of more advanced races, is imitative of the work of their elders. With little in the way of toys they gather a few bits of broken jars, which the girls utilize to cook rice in. The boys induce their father or some other male relative to make for them miniature bows and arrows, slings, and spears with which they assail dogs and crows, as well as small game along the edge of the jungle clearing. Streams afford places for them to play in the water or try for fish. With the sap of the banyan (bird-lime) smeared on a bamboo they may catch a crow for a pet. They tie together two bamboos, plantain stocks, or black bottles and lead them about as a yoke of oxen,

¹ On account of the fact that the Karen do not keep accurate age records, and also because of the shyness of the youth, it is difficult to obtain exact information as to when the children come to the age of puberty. The ages usually given me have been twelve for the girls and a year or two later for the boys. Two cases of arrested development of girls have come under my notice. Both of these died when they were reported to have been about sixteen or seventeen, and both were reported never to have had any periods. One appeared to be not more than a girl of nine or ten, while the other was larger but was emaciated and had defective eyes.

847
845
857

846

854

857

[145]